

Preaching to Jews and Gentiles

By Robert M. Johnston

There is one gospel, but when deciding how to proclaim the Christian message does one size fit all? The New Testament provides more than one model of communicating Christian truth.

The book of Acts reports in summary a number of evangelistic sermons, which have been critically analyzed by C. H. Dodd (1936). This *kerygma* (proclamation), sometimes delivered in a situation requiring an apostolic defense, was intended to change unbelievers into Christian believers. The principle examples are Acts 2:14-29; 3:13-26; 4:10-12; 5:30-32; 10:36-43; and 13:17-41.



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Some of the examples are very brief, but the nature of the general content is clear enough. It often began with a rehearsal of Bible history and prophecies and then quickly moved to the story of Jesus—his life, death, and resurrection. An important feature of the proclamation was the apostolic witness of the resurrection (2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39; 13:31). The appropriate response was to believe the message and be baptized. The *kerygma* was thus a narrative of events surrounding a central Person, delivered by people who were eye-witnesses of that Person; it did not consist of theological propositions of the sort that is found in the later creeds.

The *kerygma* is distinguished from the *didaché*, which was the instruction given to those who had decided to become followers of Jesus and join the fellowship of the believers. This instruction may have been given before baptism, as was certainly the case later, but more likely at first it was given afterwards. Jesus had told his disciples to teach their converts to observe all that he had commanded them (Matt 28:20), and this was done (Acts

2:42). Judging from the earliest church manual, the content of this instruction was mainly moral, largely drawn from the Decalogue and the compendium of Jesus's teachings that is now called the Sermon on the Mount (*Didaché* 1:1-6:3; translation in Ehrman 2003:416-427). Thus the early Christian message to these audiences in Acts consisted simply of telling the story of Jesus to unbelievers (the indicative) and telling believers how to live (the imperative). There is no worked-out dogmatic theology.

But these examples of the *kerygma* are all examples of preaching to Jews or God-fearers (Gentiles who were attracted to Judaism but had not yet submitted to circumcision so as to become full proselytes; cf. Acts 13:16). Cornelius and his household apparently belonged to this latter category (cf. 10:36; note the emphatic Greek, verse 37: *humeis oidate*, "you know"). The apostolic preachers assumed that these audiences were acquainted with Israel's scriptures and that, in some cases, at least some of them had heard something about Jesus.

There are in Acts but few examples of sermons preached to people who were thoroughly pagan Gentiles. The Roman procurator Felix was married to a Jewish woman and already had a knowledge of Christianity (24:22, 24), but he requested that Paul deliver a lecture on faith in Christ. We are told only that Paul used this opportunity

to argue "about justice and self-control and future judgment" (24:25). In other words, the message on this occasion was more *didaché* than *kerygma*. But Felix is a special case because of his wife and his prior knowledge of Christianity.

There are two better examples in Acts of preaching to pagan Gentiles in Acts 14 and 17. The first was at Lystra, to a superstitious crowd that had been impressed by Paul's miraculous healing of a cripple (14:8-18). The apostles' authority and influence rested on their demonstrated power to work wonders. There is no appeal to the Scriptures or even any mention of Jesus. Rather Paul appeals to them to turn from idolatry and false gods to the living God who created all things and who "did good and gave you from heaven rains and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with foods and gladness." This comes close to propositional theology and even to what is now called natural theology.

It is in Acts 17 that is found a classic presentation of the difference between how Paul preached to Jews and how he preached to sophisticated pagans. Here we first see Paul preaching in the Jewish synagogues in Thessalonica and then in Beroea. In both places Paul "argued with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead" (17:2, 3);

and the Bereans, in contrast to the Thessalonians, “received the word with all eagerness, examining the scriptures daily to see if these things were so” (v. 11). We can be sure that when preaching to the Jews and God-fearers of Athens (v. 17) Paul used the same method. In other words, Paul preached from the Bible when his audience knew and believed the Bible.

What is of special interest in Acts 17 is the most extensive report of Paul’s proclamation to authentic pagans, not God-fearers in a synagogue, but business people, shoppers, and idlers in the Agora. These pagans were

lent. They were not crude polytheists.

In the Hellenistic Age something like monotheism was entering high culture through a back door. Well traveled and educated people had become acquainted with the religions of the various nations of the Empire. They observed that, for example, the messenger of the gods was called Hermes by the Greeks, Mercury by the Romans, and Thoth by the Egyptians. They concluded that these were all only different names for the same god. This religious process is called *theocrasis*, the fusion of gods, and it proceeded

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not like the simple-minded ones of Lystra. While Athens was full of temples and idols (v. 16), the men who paid attention to Paul were philosophers and sophisticates who liked to keep current on the latest intellectual trends. Paul had healed nobody here. It was the novelty of Paul’s proclamation that interested them (v. 18).

It is necessary to give some attention to the mentality of these intellectual pagans. Their attitude to the temples and images which had so disgusted Paul would have been ambiva-

to a higher level. Might not all the divine names be but names of one God, who can be called many names (*myrionomy*), and all the seemingly different gods be merely different manifestations or guises of one supreme Deity?

The two philosophical schools that commanded the most popularity, specifically mentioned in Acts 17:18, were Stoicism and Epicureanism (Ferguson 2003:354). The Epicureans did not deny the existence of gods, but they denied that they needed or had any dealings

with humanity; for all practical purposes they could have been atheists, and indeed they were accused of atheism. Like the Sadducees in Judaism, Epicureans also did not believe in an afterlife. Even in rabbinic Judaism the usual word for atheist was Epicurean (see *Mishnah Sanhedrin* 10:1).

The Stoics, on the other hand, believed in a completely immanent God, but one who was not fully personal (Ferguson 2003:368). Their theology has been characterized as materialistic pantheism (or panentheism). For them God is the Force that pervades the universe and that created and sustains it. They often referred to this God as the Logos, the universal Reason by which the universe is ordered, and a portion of it resides in every person. It is clear that such a theology could logically not dwell comfortably beside the classical polytheism.

Platonists and others were also perfectly comfortable in speaking of God in the singular. But the Hellenistic intellectuals were not perfectly consistent, and in practice the monotheistic or monistic manner of speaking about God could and did coexist with the traditional polytheism. This could be rationalized in various ways. Like Caecilius in the dialogue *Octavius* written by Minucius Felix in the next century, the cultured pagan might argue that belief in the gods had been passed down

from antiquity by the elders, whose ancient traditions should be respected; and no one can speak with certainty about divine beings anyway (*Octavius* 5.5 ff, 8.1; translation in Rendall 1931:337 ff). Or he might feel that the Supreme Deity is aloof and remote and thus requires the services of lesser deities, whose role parallels that of angels in late Judaism and Christianity. He might even argue that the masses need such beliefs, and they are required for public order, even though philosophers know better.

The point of all this is to show that Paul's cultured audience at the Areopagus would have been of two minds regarding theology, and they would not necessarily have regarded what Paul had to say about God as impious, unreasonable, or especially unusual. Their own philosophers and poets had said things that were compatible with Paul's message at this point.

Paul knew that and, according to Acts 17:28, proceeded to quote their poems as proof texts. The first citation is from the Cretan poet Epimenides, whom Paul elsewhere calls a prophet (Titus 1:12). The whole stanza reads thus:

They fashioned a tomb for thee,
O holy and high one—The Cretans,
always liars, evil beasts, idle bellies!
But thou art not dead; thou livest
and abidest for ever; For in thee we
live and move and have our being.

These lines are addressed to the Greek supreme god of heaven, Zeus, and they protest the claim by Cretans that they could point out the tomb of Zeus (translation and comments in Bruce 1954:359). Zeus, originally the sky god and the head of the pantheon, had become the Supreme Being in Greek philosophy.

Paul's second citation is from a stanza by the Stoic poet Aratus (*Phaenomena* 5):

Zeus fills the streets, the marts,
Zeus fills the seas, the shores, the

says, "The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything" (Acts 17:24, 25). Here Paul speaks both to the Epicureans, who taught that God or the gods need nothing from human beings, and to the Stoics, who taught that God is the source of all life (Bruce 1951:336).

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ivers! Everywhere, our need is Zeus! We also are his offspring! (Translation in Goodspeed 1959:124.)

So Paul follows a consistent strategy of appealing to writings that had weight with his audience—the Bible with the Jews, and the philosopher-poets with the cultured Greeks. One should remember that philosophy was the real religion of the Greco-Roman intellectuals, as well as their science. Besides citing such authorities, he seeks to use language and conceptualizations that meet his hearers on familiar ground. Thus he

But while thus making contact with the minds of his hearers Paul does not hesitate to move into territory of conflict. This he begins to do at Acts 17:31, saying that God "has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead." They have listened to Paul politely until this point, but "now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked" (verse 32). To speak of a final judgment

was bad enough, but to teach the resurrection of the dead—that was intolerable. Had he spoken of an immortal soul, many (though not the Epicureans) would have accepted it, but the resurrection of the physical body was an outlandish idea, repulsive to the Greeks.

Just how offensive this doctrine was to the Greco-Roman mind we can see most clearly in the anti-Christian pagan polemics of the second century. Thus, probably following the lead of Fronto of Cirta, the character Caecilius says of the Christians:

Further, they threaten the whole world and the universe and its stars with destruction by fire, as though the eternal order of nature established by laws divine could be put into confusion, or as though the bonds of all the elements could be broken, the framework of heaven be split in twain, and the containing and surrounding mass be brought down in ruin. Not content with this insane idea, they embellish and embroider it with old wives' tales; say that they are born anew after death from the cinders and the ashes, and with a strange unaccountable confidence believe in one another's lies: you might suppose they had already come to life again . . . (*Octavius* 11.1-5).

Even more eloquent is the Neoplatonic philosopher Celsus, the first hostile pagan to make a serious investigation of Christian practice and doctrine:

It is equally silly of these Christians to suppose that when their God

applies the fire (like a common cook!) all the rest of mankind will be thoroughly roasted, and that they alone will escape unscorched—not just those alive at the time, mind you, but (they say) those long since dead will rise up from the earth possessing the same bodies as they did before. I ask you: Is this not the hope of worms? For what sort of human soul is it that has any use for a rotted corpse of a body? . . . It is nothing less than nauseating and impossible. I mean, what sort of body is it that could return to its original nature or become the same as it was before it rotted away? And of course they have no reply for this one, and as in most cases where there is no reply they take cover by saying “Nothing is impossible with God.” A brilliant answer indeed! But the fact is, God cannot do what is shameful; and God does not do what is contrary to nature. If, in your evildoing, you were to ask God to do something terrible, God could not do it—and hence you ought not to believe, as so many of them do, that every base desire is to be fulfilled for the asking. For God is not the answer to every whimsical request; he does not deal in confusion. He is the creator of what is by nature just and true and right. He may, as Heracleitus says, be able to provide everlasting life for a soul; but the same philosopher notes that “corpses should be disposed of like dung, for dung they are.” As for the body—so full of corruption and other sorts of nastiness—God could not (and would not) make it everlasting, as this is contrary to reason (Translation in Hoffmann 1987:86-87.)

For a long time the doctrine of the resurrection of the flesh remained the Christian teaching that was most offensive to the cultured pagan mind.

It is commonly said that the approach that Paul used with the Athenians was a failure, and that recognizing it as such he took a different tack when he came to Corinth:

When I came to you, brethren, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. . . . and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that our faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God (1 Cor 2:1-5).

Athens (Eusebius, *Church history* 3.4.11; translation in Williamson 1965). The Corinthian Christians were of a different class: "Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth" (1 Cor 2:26). It is true that God chose the foolish, the weak, and the lowly to shame the wise, the strong, and the prestigious (verses 27-28), but the rest of Paul's epistle to them shows clearly that this community of believers, saved by grace as they were, was not without shameful difficulties, including factional-

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He certainly told them the story of Jesus, with emphasis on the resurrection (1 Cor 15:1-11).

There may be something to the idea that Paul changed tactics after Mars Hill, but Athens was not Corinth, and Paul's effort in Athens was after all not fruitless. "Some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them" (Acts 17:34). Areopagites were the elite of the city, and Dionysius was a man of distinction who became the first bishop of the church in

ism, incest, litigation, fornication, gluttony, and relapses into pagan practices.

It has nearly always been the case that Christian evangelism has been most fruitful among the lower classes of society, for whom in fact it becomes a channel of upward mobility. It leads to a disciplined life and an appetite for learning and self-improvement, driven by the very power of God. So it was from the beginning, when Jesus said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners"

(Mark 2:17). So the first generation gets converted, the second generation gets educated, the third generation gets rich—and the next generation needs again to get converted!

The gospel must have something to say to the educated, the affluent, the respectable, and the people of rank, or else the Church will lose its own grandchildren. For this reason Paul's method in Athens ought not to be despised. Though it was perhaps not numerically successful, the fish that were attracted to his line were big fish.

In any case, what Paul did on Mars Hill became the model for a group of Christian writers in the second century known as the Apologists. They included Quadratus (ca. 124); Aristides of Athens, Aristo of Pella, and especially Justin Martyr (middle of the second century); Athenagoras of Athens and Theophilus of Antioch (second half of the second century), and others. Writing for government officials and the cultured upper classes, they assumed the task of providing an intellectual defense of Christianity, refuting scurrilous rumors and making the case for the intellectual respectability of the faith. Their own backgrounds and their work reveal certain common characteristics. Arthur D. Nock importantly notes:

First, the apologists were without exception men who were not the sons of Christians but had been converted to Christianity themselves.

The *apologia* of each of them was therefore in a measure an *apologia pro vita sua*. Secondly, they all represented Christianity as something which had come not to destroy but to fulfill. They maintained that its essential principles were what humanity at its best had always held or sought . . . (Nock 1933:250).

They could speak to pagan philosophers because they themselves had been pagan philosophers, and in the process of seeking to express the gospel in a way acceptable to contemporary thought leaders they became the first real Christian theologians, for better or for worse.

All of them, as far as we know, produced a special tract defending the doctrine of the resurrection, though most of these tracts have not survived. And all of them made use of Paul's Mars Hill strategy of quoting revered philosophers and poets in support of Christian teaching.

Justin Martyr (ca. 100-165) is particularly interesting because his major writings have mostly survived, and because they fall into two categories. One major work, his *Dialogue with Trypho*, is addressed to Jews. It is saturated through and through with arguments from the Bible, and pagan authors have no place. The second category is his two *Apologies*, addressed to cultured pagans. It is peppered with references to the classic poets and philosophers, and it even alludes to popular mythology. But it also makes

use of the Bible and Christian tradition to show how Christ fulfilled prophecy.

Justin felt it necessary to explain how pagan writers could say anything true, since he used their statements to prove his points. He had two explanations. One was that they plagiarized from Moses (e.g., *Apology* 1:59). His more interesting explanation was one that laminated the Stoic doctrine of the spermatic Logos with John 1:9 (cf. "The implanted word," James 1:21). Christ, the preexistent Logos (translated either as Word or as Reason) of God has enlightened

Justin would have agreed that all truth, wherever found, is God's truth, and whatever is true is from God through Christ (cf. White 1940:464-65).

Of course, using non-Christian imagery, thought-forms, and authors to communicate Christian truth is dangerous. The medium can become the message. But the Apologists used the point of contact to express a new Christian meaning, and thus it became a point of conflict (Sellers 1961:60-86). And they regarded only a few men as "Christians before Christ," such as Abraham and

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every man, and everyone who lived according to Reason was a Christian, whether he knew it or not. Thus Socrates and Plato had truth—not complete, and not unmixed with error, but truth nonetheless.

For each man spoke well in proportion to the share he had of the spermatic word, seeing what was related to it. . . . Whatever things were rightly said among all men, are the property of us Christians. . . . For all the writers were able to see realities darkly through the sowing of the implanted word that was in them (*Apology* 2:13).

Socrates. Only Christian teaching is true, and if philosophers spoke truth, it was only a partial truth. But truth is truth, and the gospel completes and corrects all that was said before rightly but imperfectly.

Whether preaching to Jew or Greek, the strategy was to build on Christ but connect him to what the audience already knew. No old truth was denied, but no old error was approved. The message was partly in continuity with the old traditions, but it was also in conflict with them. The continuity with the

old made the message comprehensible, while the conflict with the old gave a reason for changing to the new.

Missionaries and evangelists today face two species of target audience in the West. One kind is Jews and Christians for whom the Bible is authoritative. One need only prove a doctrine from the Scriptures successfully for them to be bound by it. The other kind is secular people, whether pre-Christian or post-Christian. They neither know nor believe the Bible. What is authoritative for them is not now the cloaked philosopher or poet of the ancient world, but rather the white-coated scientist. One gets their attention not by saying "the Bible says," but by beginning with "studies have shown." Increasingly this is becoming the situation also in the non-Western world. The common ground, at least with the cultured elite, is less to be found in Quranic sura or Buddhist sutra than in the findings of science.

In meeting this challenge Christians can perhaps find some help in Paul's speech at the Areopagus and in the work of his successors, the Apologists. Their necessary work contributed in large measure to the triumph of Christianity in the Greco-Roman world. The question to be pondered is how much, in the process, the Greco-Roman world crawled into Christianity.

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